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## Gender and Poetry: The Role of Women Poets in Myanmar/Burma

Pandora

Panel: Spectral Gender

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## **PANDORA**

### **Gender and Poetry: The Role of Women Poets in Myanmar/Burma**

Traditionally, women in Myanmar are the subjects, rather than the creators, of poetry. Over the centuries, female experiences and women's poetic reflections on nature, romance, nostalgia and domestic life have earned only a marginal position in my country's literary traditions. Also, the female voice has also not been piercing enough to penetrate the standards of the men who constitute the majority of poets.

Most poetry anthologies contain little, if any, work by women. In local magazines and journals, male poets largely outnumber female poets--who might question if their works are not "remarkable" enough to merit inclusion in these venues. Some members of the literary community posit that women simply do not submit as many poems to magazines and journals as men do. Both seem like questionable excuses. In the current Myanmar poetry scene, those who are publishing, receiving awards, writing poetry criticism and analysis, and leading discussions on poetical ideologies are primarily men. And though the work of women poets has evolved along with the rest of Myanmar's literary tradition, none have been credited as the initiators of any poetic movements.

The Poetry Foundation Website provides insight into the international poetry scene. The site, which features poetry in English and in translation from all over the world, includes 4035 male poets but only 2342 female poets. But even with this discrepancy, a few women are being recognized for their work. Two female poets have won the Nobel Prize in literature. Among 78 American poets who have won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry are 26 female poets. Women poets in Africa, Asia and Middle East are being anthologized. Hence, the quality of women poets in international poetry scene in terms of skills and recognition are competitive enough although the quantity of women poets seems to lag behind that of men poets everywhere.

The social norms of Myanmar can pose a challenge to women's ability to create poetry that is innovative and bold. The cultural notion of women as a "second sex" can create an environment where women are reluctant to use explicit language and write about sexual or erotic subjects, or participate in the traditionally male domains of politics and socio-economics. This reluctance might also prevent women from addressing more "serious" subject matter in their poetry.

During the Myanmar monarchy, as well as during its colonial periods, educational opportunities were reserved for boys as it was assumed they would be the breadwinners for their future families. Girls, on the other hand, were discouraged from achieving more than functional literacy. The study of poetry, which was widely regarded as "the property of the wise," was also out of the question for girls.

Even now, when access to education is more egalitarian, the modern and contemporary poetry of Myanmar is not taught in primary or secondary school, or even in university literature classes. Instead, the study of this poetry is done informally among poets through translations of international poetry, new literary criticism, private publication of poetry books and poetry workshops held in teashops, galleries or libraries. Hence, if women want to become strong poets, they must make an extra effort to explore outside the formal education system. Still, societal norms separating women from men make that difficult.

Generally speaking, our society still has fixed ideas concerning who women should be and how they should behave. A military ruling system, no longer in power, also contributed by excluding women from having a voice in how their country is governed. Under these circumstances, if women comply with these norms, they are likely to produce monotonic and obedient poems rather than poems that question their oppressive, male-dominated society.

Progress is being made. Though women poets are outnumbered, the new generation of poets, both women and men, are deviating from the poetry mainstream, representing new cultural values in their work. I see this inclusion of young women in the development of a new poetry paradigm as a ray of hope. As well, a significant number of Myanmar women writers are making a name for themselves in prose. Outside literature, we see outstanding women taking on leadership roles in business, social, economic and political areas.

There is no doubt that the inclusion of women's work and the development of stronger women's voices will provide a more complete picture not only of the history of poetry, but also of history in general. More thorough research needs to be done to discover why women are underrepresented in poetry and how they can be better represented in the future. In the unlikely event that this problem is only present in Myanmar, it is something that must be resolved. If it is universal, which I believe it is, it will take a universal effort to ensure that the gaps are filled.